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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFENSE MINISTER SUGGESTS NEW TWIST ON
PRESIDENCY

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Defense Minister Elias Murr believes Syria ultimately will scuttle the most recent compromise idea (promoted by his father Michel) for solving Lebanon's political impasse -- appointing Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Michel Sleiman for a two-year term to replace President Emile Lahoud. Syria's only goal is continued political chaos in Lebanon, and it will use its Lebanese allies to pull the plug on any initiative that appears likely to bring an end to the ongoing impasse, Murr contends. Perversely, the opposition is now downplaying threats of a second government precisely because that risk appeared to be pushing March 14 towards a compromise. In Murr's mind, the two-year Sleiman presidency scenario presents a win-win solution for March 14: by feigning to support Sleiman, it would gain his loyalties (and more importantly, those of the LAF) when the Syrian-backed opposition eventually dashes his presidential aspirations. End summary.

FADING OF TWO-GOVERNMENT THREAT:
ACTUALLY A SYRIAN PLOY TO PREVENT SOLUTION

12. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Murr at his home on July 3. Much of the discussion focused on an idea Murr's father, Metn political boss and MP Michel Murr, has been promoting: a two-year transitional presidency, filled by LAF Commander Michel Sleiman. (Michel Murr argues that, while a two-year presidency is no one's first choice, it is in fact the only viable solution. Maronite presidential candidates, none of whom are assured of victory this year, will embrace it, in the hopes of bettering their chances for elections two years hence. Maronite Patriarch Sfeir will accept it as preferable to a potential vacuum in the office. March 8 leaders will hope that, in two years, their parliamentary weight will be greater, given summer 2009 elections. And so on.)

13. (C) In what seemed to us one of the more twisted explanations for Syria's behavior in Lebanon, Elias Murr argued that the recent waning of talk of a second government was the result of Damascus' efforts to keep the political situation on edge (though he also agreed the US visa ban was "a good message"). The threat of a second government, which Murr termed "a very dangerous game," had pushed Future

Movement leader Saad Hariri toward accepting a compromise in the form of a two-year presidency, Murr claimed. Since Syria's true intent is to avoid a compromise at any cost, Murr explained, it now is withdrawing the threat to remove any incentive for March 14 to reach a deal with the opposition. Murr, essentially advocating that March 14 call the opposition's bluff and agree to his father's proposal for a two-year Sleiman presidency, said, "Let them (the pro-Syrians) be the ones to say no." March 14 would then reap the dual victory of being seen as the side that was ready to compromise to put an end to the ongoing political standoff, and of securing the support of Sleiman and the LAF in the process. "It's a win-win solution," Murr said.

SUPPORT SLEIMAN TO GAIN HIS LOYALTY,
IN KNOWLEDGE HE'LL NOT WIN THE PRESIDENCY

14. (C) Echoing some of his father's earlier comments to the Ambassador, Murr urged the US to express enthusiasm for a Sleiman presidency, noting that Saad Hariri had already given his support. Amal leader Nabih Berri would also agree because, according to Murr, he was looking for a solution at any price so as to appear blameless for the country's political problems. The Patriarch would support any consensus candidate. But, in fact, Sleiman would not become president: the Syrians, in the end, would tell Hizballah not to support Sleiman in its efforts to prevent a solution to the political stalemate. There will be a vacuum, most likely filled in a two-government scenario. So, Murr concluded, if Sleiman believes he has March 14 and US support, while Syria and Hizballah leave him in the lurch, we will gain his loyalties and keep the army on our side. That would be a significant accomplishment and reduce the support for the

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potential second cabinet.

15. (C) The Ambassador pointed out several problems with the strategy: 1) UN Special Envoy for Lebanon Geir Pedersen doesn't believe Hizballah will veto Sleiman; 2) Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, who harbors his own presidential hopes, strongly dislikes Sleiman and would probably not risk supporting him; 3) the Patriarch isn't fond of military presidents and is even more allergic to tampering with the constitution, which a two-year presidency and a Sleiman presidency (because of prohibition on military candidates) would require; 4) Sleiman is acting constructively now because he is following Minister Murr's orders, but as head of state would no longer have that constraint; 5) Sleiman has not proven himself to be a very strong leader, often becoming paralyzed for fear of offending one side or the other; and 6) Murr's approach could actually be a trap to install another Syrian-backed president, namely Sleiman, this time one with the army behind him.

SLEIMAN NO LONGER A SYRIAN SATELLITE

16. (C) Murr's answer to the last concern was an emphatic no. Sleiman already is indicating his growing disillusionment with Damascus and Hizballah. He claimed to have cut his ties with Syria following the March 14, 2005, demonstrations, when he ordered the LAF to protect the protesters. Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's presumption in giving

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the LAF "red lines" in its Nahr al-Barid fight offended him. Though initially reluctant to send his forces into the Nahr al-Barid camp (Murr admitted Sleiman's wariness about upsetting the Shia was to blame for his initial inaction), Sleiman now will do anything to defend his country and wants to "destroy" anything related to Syria, Murr claimed. Nahr al-Barid changed him, gave him a taste of what it means to be a real Lebanese.

¶7. (C) Though agreeing that Sleiman is "not a leader," Murr said Sleiman wants to prove he's a better politician than commander-in-chief. Furthermore, as the last officer from the pre-1975-1990 civil war generation, he enjoys the respect of his troops, who "trust" him not to destroy the army. However, Murr admitted, the general will have to fight to maintain the unit of the army and avoid a Sunni-Shia split in the upcoming months. But if March 14 supports his candidacy for president, "at least we won't have an enemy in Sleiman," Murr contended, at a time when, more than ever, March 14 needs the LAF on its side.

¶8. (C) Murr dismissed Pedersen's opinion as a reflection of his narrowly-focused concerns for UN forces in Lebanon. As for the Patriarch, Murr said he had sent LAF G-2 (Intelligence) Director George Khoury to speak with him. The Patriarch reportedly said he would not block a Sleiman presidency if it resolves Lebanon's political problems and if there's consensus. March 14 would work on Geagea and Progressive Socialist Leader Walid Jumblatt. Murr emphasized again that either Hizballah or Aoun would ultimately veto the idea, so March 14's strategy should be to support it in order to gain Sleiman's gratitude and loyalty, thus securing the LAF on the side of March 14 in a two-government crisis.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Elias Murr would have us believe that -- as we busily scribble our notes -- he is confiding to us insights he keeps hidden from his powerful father Michel. Michel purports to be pushing the idea of a two-year interim presidency, filled by LAF Commander Sleiman, as a last-ditch, desperate move to save Lebanon from the chaos Syria plans to impose. Elias, by contrast, whispers conspiratorially that his father is naive (an infrequent accusation against anyone in the wily Murr clan), as it is impossible to avoid the chaos; Syria will not allow a solution to Lebanon's political crisis that doesn't restore Syrian hegemony. So March 14 leaders should be applauding his father's initiative not because it has any chance of success: it doesn't, as Syria will use Hizballah or Aoun to veto it. But March 14 can use Michel's proposal to win Sleiman and the LAF to the side of the legitimate cabinet, in case of a two-government scenario. While it would be a great coup to have Sleiman and the LAF firmly on March 14's side, we wonder whether Syria would really veto a

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Sleiman presidency.

¶10. (C) Michel Murr is famous (or infamous) for back room political deal-making. His political opportunism -- which made him a firm ally of Damascus during the Syrian occupation -- now puts him on the side of presidential elections, as power will accrue to him if he succeeds in creating Lebanon's next president. As for Elias, he must have an interest in seeing Sleiman as president, since Sleiman would be grateful to Elias: Sleiman has renewed popularity and credibility today because of political backing (at times even pushing) from Elias Murr for military action at key points in the Nahr al-Barid fighting. So we suspect that the related-but-contrasting pitches from Murr pere et fils have more to do with positioning the Murr dynasty cleverly than with saving Lebanon.

¶11. (C) As for the two-year presidency idea, this is not its first incarnation. Until now, the idea has been considered and then shelved, for fear that a two-year presidency would further undermine Lebanon's constitutional institutions and create a two-year political stalemate, as everyone jockeys for position for 2009 legislative and presidential elections. We told Michel Murr that it would be far better for him to devote his political shuttling efforts to promoting a six-year presidency in accordance with Lebanon's constitution. But, in the end, if the Lebanese themselves collectively focus on a two-year presidency as the

best way to avoid vacuum and chaos, we should not be the ones to block it. We propose neither facilitating nor blocking an idea that we calculate is, like so many other Lebanese proposals, more likely than not going to be shelved by the Lebanese themselves.

FELTMAN